

Teaching English to North Korean Refugees in South Korea: An Interview with Karen Choi

Alzo David-West

Abstract

This interview with Karen Choi, an instructor of teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) at Hanyang University in Seoul, South Korea, addresses problems of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) to North Korean refugees in South Korea. Ms. Choi taught thirty North Korean students in their late teens to thirties in fall 2007 in voluntary collaboration with the Seoul-based Korean Refugees Youth Christian Association (KRYCA). She discusses the students' backgrounds and learning preferences; ideology, politics, and gender issues in the EFL classroom; attitudes and motivation; and concludes with instructional advice. The interview was conducted on December 2, 2009, by Alzo David-West, newsbriefs editor for *North Korean Review*.

Keywords: EFL learners, English conversation,
grammar-translation method, North Korean refugees, TESOL

Background

Alzo David-West: *How did you become interested in teaching English as a foreign language?*

Karen Choi: First, I would like to say that it is my delight that I am able to share a little about my experience teaching North Korean refugees in South Korea. It is my

*Duksung Women's University, 419 Sangmun-dong Dobong-gu, Seoul 132-714
South Korea; adavidwest@yahoo.com*



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hope that this information will be helpful to others who have the opportunity to teach English to North Koreans.

My interest in teaching English began after college. For my undergraduate studies, I pursued my interest in visual arts and studied classical animation in Canada. Upon graduation, I began to realize that working in film companies entailed projects that I did not necessarily care for. It was through this experience that I realized my chance of survival in the commercial arts industry was very slim. I truly enjoyed learning to creatively express and communicate through visuals. However, it seemed very unlikely for me to find a job in a company and work on projects that I was satisfied with. Though I still have hopes to produce my own short film, this dream will have to wait. After much thought, I decided to return to school to pursue my other interests apart from the arts—language and culture.

I believe frequent traveling during my childhood influenced me in developing interests for language and culture. I grew up in a few different countries: South Korea, Singapore, and Indonesia. My first seven years of school was spent in Singapore—a very multicultural country—where I learned two of its official languages: English and Mandarin. When I moved to pursue higher education in Canada, its diversity further stimulated my interest in language and culture, so I decided to get a formal introduction to both through a one-year TESL (teaching English as a second language) certificate course. It included courses in linguistics but, as I expected, was largely focused on English education as a second or foreign language.

I enjoyed the course a lot more than I expected and proceeded to apply for a graduate program in TESOL (teaching English to speakers of other languages). I had several short-term teaching opportunities in various contexts during those years of training, and I found myself enjoying them despite the challenges in each context. Examples of my teaching contexts varied, from immigrants to university students in Canada to businessmen and graduate students looking for jobs in South Korea. I am currently teaching full-time at Hanyang University in Seoul.

AD: How did you come to teach English to North Korean refugees in South Korea?

KC: Surprisingly, my interest in North Korea did not begin in South Korea, but during my time in Canada. The initial trigger was non-Koreans frequently asking me which Korea I was from: the North or the South. This was a common follow-up question when I told them I was from “Korea.” To be honest, I was initially disappointed with their inability to distinguish South Korea from the Communist hermit country. I assumed it was common sense for the average North American to know more about North Korea. However, after being asked a few times, I started to ponder on how much I—as a Korean—knew about the secretive nation. I then came to the painful and embarrassing realization that I didn’t know much about it either. To compensate, I slowly began to do some simple research on the country.

I was shocked and saddened to learn about the details of some of the incredible hardships and injustices the people of North Korea experience. It was hard to believe that other Koreans were leading such a different lifestyle just north of me. The slightest bit of encouragement for me was in learning that there are organizations that aim

to help these oppressed people. However, North Korea still remained rather distant to me, and I felt powerless hearing of all the abuses in the country.

To my surprise, I inadvertently crossed paths with a few Canadian humanitarian groups that had access to North Korea. They were making small changes through relief projects and other means. Unlike these Canadians, I was unable to join them because of my South Korean citizenship, which is not welcomed in North Korea. During my studies in TESOL, I returned to South Korea to gain experience teaching university English for two semesters. As I continued to read about North Korea, I learned that the number of North Korean refugees had increased greatly since the famine towards the late 1990s and that those living in South Korea typically experience great difficulties adjusting to the new culture. With my background in TESOL, I thought one small way I could help was to teach them English. Upon discussing with friends who were involved with social work in South Korea, I was connected with a group of North Korean refugees who met every week. They were young adults, most attending universities, and in need of an English teacher. Compared to most of their South Korean peers, their English proficiency was considerably lower, and thus, they were constantly seeking extra classes in English. I gladly volunteered to be their teacher, and they accepted me.

AD: What circumstances brought your North Korean students to South Korea?

KC: Their stories varied largely as they come from differing backgrounds. They are from different regions of the country and had different jobs. Although most seem to have come from rural areas, there was also a student who claimed to be from the capital, Pyongyang. Almost all of them seemed to be from areas that were close to the Chinese border or towns by the west coast. Other than that one student from Pyongyang, I have yet to meet another refugee from inland North Korea. Besides doing chores or farming, a few said they traded small amounts of clothes from China, and another used to be a town government official. Education levels also varied.

However, there is a commonality in that almost all of them regarded themselves to be *economic* rather than political refugees. When telling stories of their journey here to South Korea, most of them stated that they were motivated to escape mainly because of hunger and poverty. Information about the outside world — whether it was through secondhand stories and rumors or their own experience traveling to China for trade — suggested much better living conditions in contrast to North Korea's reference to itself as a "paradise."

AD: How many North Korean refugees have you taught and for how long?

KC: The class I taught was part of a weekly gathering for North Korean refugees attending university in the South. There were also a number of individuals who were preparing to apply to universities. The gathering was organized by the Korean Refugees Youth Christian Association (Talbuk Ch'ŏngnyŏn Krisuchŏn Yŏnhaphoe), which is led by a few former refugees who are passionate about the younger generation.¹ This group provides young adult refugees with encouragement from a Christian perspective and social networking opportunities with fellow expatriates who are

attending universities. When I taught, each class involved an hour-long English Bible study. The practical purpose of the class was for students to not only learn about the Bible, but to also develop their English skills at the same time.

Since English is one of the most necessary skills to improve the lives of North Koreans, language training was incorporated to keep students—especially those who are not religious—motivated to come to the gathering. I taught from September to December 2007. We met once a week on Saturday mornings, and attendance ranged from about ten to thirty students each week. I had to leave for Canada to finish my graduate studies, but since my return to South Korea in the summer of 2008, I have occasionally visited the group.

AD: Did your students have prior exposure to English in North Korea?

KC: Most of them claimed they did not receive any English education since it was not a required school subject in the North. In high school or university, English was offered as a foreign language, but it was not as popular as Russian. At least five of them said they formally studied Russian as a foreign language while in North Korea. Most of them had lived in China for a number of years in their journey to South Korea. Therefore, they have some knowledge of Mandarin. I only came across two students who said they had formally studied English in North Korea. They were rather shy to admit that, since their proficiency was low. My assumption is that they were mainly taught “metalanguage” (language about language) rather than the language itself, just as South Koreans were taught a few decades ago.

Ideology, Politics, and Gender

AD: Did your classes consist of all male or female students, or were the classes coeducational?

KC: It was coeducational with a good mix of female and male students.

AD: How would you describe the social dynamics of the North Korean EFL students according to gender?

KC: I thought it was similar to a typical EFL classroom in South Korea. They were mostly passive and shy. Similar to young adult South Koreans, they tended to avoid sitting right beside the opposite sex. They were especially shy about talking to one another in English, probably because they were not used to it.

Men in the classroom seemed to be more participative. They were generally more responsive, asking questions and responding to questions I asked. Some even seemed to enjoy demonstrating their English knowledge by asking extensive grammar questions.² On the other hand, the women very rarely spoke up in class. Even when I prompted them by calling them by name and giving them hints to answers, they were reluctant or answered rather timidly. They would approach me personally with questions and comments after class. My interpretation is that the men in general were more comfortable being the focus of attention while the women were more comfortable being passive and reserved.

Assumed gender roles were evident, most likely deriving from the Confucian influence in Korean culture. Drinks and light snacks were usually provided each week, and although some of the men did not avoid serving, it was almost always the women who hastened to serve. This was also the case when dining in restaurants after the meeting. Though no one demanded it of them, women usually took the initiative to serve water and set up tableware on the dining table. (Water and tableware are commonly self-served in most South Korean restaurants.)

AD: *Did your students ever mention the Juche (self-reliance) ideology and in what context?*

KC: It was discussed, although not primarily in the classroom context. In class, I tried to avoid politics or references to the students' lives in North Korea as much as I could, since those can be sensitive topics. But after a few conversations with my students after class, I got the impression that most of them were quite open to talking about their lives in North Korea. They would generally go on at great length to describe their personal lives rather than ideology.

One student in particular often mentioned his experiences in North Korea. I will call him Jung, although that is not his real name. Jung is in his late twenties, and it was about seven or eight years since he had settled in South Korea. He is a devout Christian who is passionate to serve and help other North Korean refugees. He is working as one of the leaders of the KRYCA. Unlike most of the other refugees, Jung was outgoing and had a very positive attitude. Not only did he have an outstanding sense of leadership and compassion for others, he was also incredibly diligent and bright. He stood out in class. When talking about North Korea, he would rant about the failures of *Juche* ideology and how ironic it is that the country is not at all "self-reliant." He also often informed me of how ludicrous the whole system was—all the absurd attempts to instill in people that the Kim family were their "gods." I asked if he was aware of this when he was living in the country. He lived with his family in a region that was relatively close to the Chinese border, so they were exposed to stories and rumors about the outside world. He professed that he began doubting *Juche* in his teens and finally stopped believing in the ideology as he reached his twenties. Tired of poverty, he succeeded in escaping from North Korea after a few attempts. He claimed that most common people in his neighborhood were aware of the failures of the ideology. They just lived every day of their lives in fear of the punishment that would follow were they to be pronounced as "counterrevolutionary."

AD: *Were references ever made to Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il, or the North Korean political system?*

KC: Along with talks about *Juche*, yes, they were. As expected, I have never come across any refugee who spoke well of either of the Kims. The leaders' names were often mentioned when describing life in North Korea and in derogatory jokes. I recall Jung frequently including Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il in his discussions of how nonsensical the political system was. Other students also referred to the Kims in a similar manner and openly offered detailed descriptions of the state personality cult.

Students illustrated how pictures were wrapped in thin vinyl sheets in every room, banners placed around cities praising the Kims, and TV reports aired daily on the “noble” things Kim Jong Il did that day—from his humble lunch menu of a small rice ball to places he visited. One younger student, in his teens, testified to the TV reports. He said that his father watched one and commented, “How is it possible for him to grow a belly that big if he truly eats that little according to these reports? Something is definitely not right.” As the father’s doubts in the political system grew, he decided to defect. His family did not live by the Chinese border, which is where most refugees are from. They lived by the southwest coast and miraculously made it to South Korea by boat.

The student was not clear about what his father did for a living in North Korea, but the family led a relatively “affluent” life by North Korean standards, living with a TV and not experiencing poverty. He said he didn’t remember being hungry, although the choice of food was limited to very simple meals with only one or two side dishes from time to time.

According to the refugees I taught, people from different regions of North Korea lead quite different lives depending on their job status and the leaders in each region. Traveling is very restricted within the country. Hence, there is little communication or exchange of information between regions. This explains why the refugees were also intrigued by the stories of North Koreans from other regions.

My assumption is that the refugees enjoy describing their former lives in North Korea since they quite enjoy the reactions of interest, shock, and disbelief of South Korean listeners. Many of the refugees admit that it is such a relief for them to be able to talk about the country freely.

AD: *How did the students adapt to social and political life in South Korea?*

KC: Several of them commented that their three months in the government-run Hanawon resettlement center was useful, but not enough to help them through their culture shock in South Korea. After all, it takes great effort for grown adults to “unlearn” everything they once knew as acceptable and true and then readjust to a whole new set of cultural and political rules. As far as I know, there are a few independent Christian organizations that offer programs that seem to be an extension of Hanawon. These organizations offer further guidance from a spiritual perspective and practical academic courses.

Nevertheless, it is still up to the individual to successfully adapt to the new society. Their adaptation process was very similar to any immigrant trying to settle in a new country. One may think these refugees would experience less culture shock since they speak the same language and share similar cultural traditions. However, that is far from the truth. The differences in culture between the two Koreas are great. While the South has had broad international influences, adopting much of Western culture alongside incredibly rapid economic growth, North Korea has been closed and insular. The Korean language used in South Korea today consequently includes many new words borrowed from other languages, as well as new expressions from popular culture and technology. This can explain some of the reasons why North Korean refugees have described their South Korean university lectures as sounding foreign. As a result,

most refugees complain that it is incredibly difficult to understand and be understood when they first move to South Korea.

I believe my unique childhood enabled me to sympathize better with my refugee students. They frequently encountered misunderstandings because people assumed they were typical “South Koreans” on the outside. However, we do not share the same cultural background. When I returned to South Korea after spending seven years in Singapore, the culture shock I experienced was overwhelming. I still experience it now, but perhaps I have learned to live with it. For the North Korean refugees who were indoctrinated with political propaganda all their lives, it is very difficult to adjust to life in a democratic nation.

Just as younger children adapt much faster with less effort to the target culture, it is the same for young North Korean refugees. The older students are the ones who seem to constantly struggle to “relearn” Korean, to learn new skills through new methods, and to adjust to a new work environment. Most of them admitted that they went through a period of depression, not wanting any contact with the outside world. They commonly described the initial adjustment period as overwhelming, “beyond description.” Younger students—those still in their teens—seemed at ease, less nostalgic or worried, and were more positive and outgoing.

Attitudes and Motivation

AD: What were the age, educational, and skill levels of your North Korean students?

KC: As I mentioned earlier, the group consisted mostly of refugees who were attending universities in South Korea. Their ages ranged from high school students in their late teens to adults in their thirties. A few of the older students had bachelor’s degrees, and one even had a master’s degree in music. Almost all of the younger students in their late teens seemed to have at least graduated high school.

Two refugees who oversaw the study group also sat in my class. They were not undergraduate students, and they were significantly older: a lady in charge of this group—probably in her early forties—and an older man, perhaps in his fifties or sixties. Although it is culturally acceptable to ask for an acquaintance’s age in Korean culture, I was careful to ask the older students since they seemed more shy and self-conscious about their age. My guess is that the average age would be somewhere in the early thirties.

In terms of English proficiency levels, there was a very large range, from those who were barely literate to those who were mid-intermediate. Most of the refugees seemed to be low or high beginners and were able to create very basic phrases and demonstrated knowledge of simple vocabulary. However, a couple of students had almost no knowledge of basic English phonics. At least two students, including Jung, were at the mid-intermediate level—capable of effectively creating complex sentences. This large gap in proficiency levels was one of the greatest challenges in teaching the class.

AD: How do North Korean students' attitudes compare to those of South Korean students?

KC: There are several commonalities between the two groups of students. Assumed gender role is one example I have already mentioned. Another is respecting elders, leaders, and the teacher. My students showed respect through bowing lower and longer to the two leaders of the group (the lady and the elderly man) and me, since I was the teacher. Though I was a younger female among most of my students, they always bowed and were hospitable to me. The elderly man was apparently a general in North Korea, and he was rather demanding. He insisted that I teach in the manner that he commanded, which was doing word-for-word translations of texts and making lists of all the possible grammatical structures in English. I had to finally modify my conversation and discussion class to better meet his commands. Perhaps his behavior was a result of his position as an elder in charge of the group — old age automatically earns respect in Korean culture — and his past job in North Korea as a general. I was practically yelled at (he had a rather loud voice), and I was ordered to follow his instructions. My words were cut off as I was speaking, and I almost felt that this was a taste of what it may be like to be in North Korea: following orders without question. I knew this man was a truly good person at heart, but it was a difficult moment, as I was not used to his way of communicating.

A peculiar quality I noticed in North Korean students was that the tendencies of South Korean students were amplified in them. I believe these may be values that they may have blindly — and most probably subconsciously — adopted in the process of adjusting to life in South Korea. Examples include fashion, popular culture, and values to look for in a partner such as a girlfriend or boyfriend. Awareness of the importance of English proficiency in hopes to get a desirable job position was not an exception. Universities at the time were implementing a new policy that required students to achieve a minimum score in standardized tests to graduate. As such, North Korean students were faced with tremendous pressure to improve their English in a short period of time. Moreover, South Korean companies focus on test scores in the initial job recruiting process. No wonder a number of the North Korean students seemed blindly obsessed with these proficiency tests. “Can you design this English class to improve my TOEIC scores?” “How can I improve my TOEIC scores through this class?” “You know my English skills. Do you think I’m ready to take the TOEFL test? Could you tell me my estimated score range?” All these were questions I received from them.

Blind acceptance of South Korean students’ beliefs was evident in their desire to attend prestigious South Korean universities. Being admitted to a university in Seoul is highly competitive for South Korean students, but entry requirements for North Korean students are exceptionally lower. Hence, it is very common for students from North Korea to attend an elite university in South Korea, one that most South Korean students can only dream of. The problem here, though, is that North Korean students are not used to the intense education system in the South. Consequently, they struggle to keep up since there is a large learning gap. The refugees have a difficult time understanding *what* is being taught (the contents of the class) and

also *how* it is being taught (the education system and teaching styles in South Korea). In general, South Korean universities are extremely difficult to enter, but graduation is relatively easy. There may be a few North Korean students who work hard and successfully graduate. Most others, unfortunately, feel lost in their schools and eventually drop out. One of their common concerns is English, since most students lack the basic foundation. Taking extra courses in private institutes like most other South Korean students would not be of much help because North Korean students will be facing similar problems as they do in their schools. What they need are special classes that cater to their unique needs.

Finding a job one desires may be difficult for the average South Korean. For North Koreans, they claim that it is “almost impossible” to find anything decent. South Korean companies strongly favor graduates from prestigious universities in Seoul, and even if the refugees somehow graduate from these universities, firms seem to be reluctant to hire them since they are aware of the North Koreans’ “easier” entry requirements into those schools. Thus, North Korean refugees are even more obsessed with test scores—probably as a way to prove themselves.

Most refugees seem to be overwhelmed by the high expectations that surround them. They learn that they are “helpless” in their schools, since the standards for graduation, let alone finding a job they desire, appear far too high for them. One student who had stopped attending the study group just as I began teaching graduated from a prestigious university and got a job at a South Korean bank. This was such an unusual event that he was featured in the Seoul Christian newspaper *Kookmin Ilbo*.³ While I was teaching, he visited and gave a speech. The room was full of other North Korean refugees who came just to hear him that day. He has become a “testimony of hope” to them. They were clearly moved and believed that they too could graduate and succeed in South Korea.

AD: Were the students more used to teacher-centered or student-centered learning?

KC: They were definitely more comfortable with non-participative, passive, teacher-centered learning. That is a strong characteristic of the grammar-translation method, and the students seemed very comfortable simply listening in class.⁴ Just like a typical class of young adult South Koreans, only a few would attempt to answer when I asked a question. When I asked them to work on a task in pairs or small groups, they seemed to feel awkward and uncomfortable. Thankfully, things improved with time. Though most of them were fairly talkative with me and other students outside of class, they were generally reserved in class.

AD: What sort of motivational techniques did you use to encourage English language learning?

KC: I made every effort to make the class an enjoyable and encouraging experience for my students. Such attempts may not have been successful every week, but each class was a good challenge. As I mentioned before, initially, I tried to have conversational classes, but students complained that they were not “learning” much. They requested more grammar and word-for-word translations, and I gave in.

The classes were based on themes that I thought would be encouraging for them, such as hope, love, and grace. Each theme lasted for about a month. A short text from the Bible according to the theme was chosen, following an easier version that used everyday English.

I would begin the class with very simple, common expressions, such as greetings or small talk. In response to their preference for the grammar-translation method, the text was studied inductively, and basic grammatical structures were pointed out. Then, based on the basic structures learned, students had to create their own sentences. I also mixed in repetitive drills. One relatively short and simple sentence with an encouraging message would be chosen from the text each week for these drills. Likewise, we studied the structure and meaning and then repeated it until most of them had it memorized. Students also had to repeat the phrases with some rather exaggerated actions that reflected the meaning of the key words. This was very awkward in the beginning and there was initial hesitation, but the students participated and seemed to enjoy the activity more with time.

Problems and Advice

AD: What were some unique language problems you encountered while teaching English to the North Korean refugees?

KC: I do not recall language problems that were unique in comparison to South Korean students. If anything, the problems were the same as those exhibited by South Koreans, but only more pronounced. This is probably due to the interference of a common mother tongue. The refugees had a stronger “Korean accent” and more frequently made grammatical errors that South Koreans make, for example, confusion of gender pronouns and translating expressions directly from Korean. What differs is that South Korean students have had more exposure and opportunities to learn English as compared to North Korean students.

AD: Which of the four language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) was stronger among the students?

KC: Since their primary method of learning any kind of foreign language was the grammar-translation method, their strongest skill was reading. Skills where they had to produce language — speaking and writing — were weak, and speaking seemed especially difficult since they were extremely self-conscious and shy about it.

AD: What is your advice to English instructors who will teach North Korean refugees for the first time?

KC: Based on my rather limited experience teaching North Korean students, I would say one of the most important things is to have an open ear and patiently earn their trust. Expect misunderstandings, both verbal and nonverbal, and it is all right even if these may be left unresolved most of the time. The teacher should not dwell on misunderstandings and let awkwardness affect the student-teacher relationship.

Being sensitive to the needs of North Korean refugees is one way to earn their trust and motivate them to participate more in class. Refugees who have just “graduated” from Hanawon will typically still be overwhelmed by the new way of life in South Korea. It is common for students to sometimes display behavior that is difficult to understand.

In my experience, older adult learners who are accustomed to a traditional language learning method may need to be more slowly directed away from their old way of learning before adapting to a newer method. My example was with the elderly ex-general who gave me “orders” to modify my teaching approach. Initially, it was difficult to “obey,” but when I did, the students seemed to enjoy the class much more. Suggesting very simple self-study methods may be useful since North Korean refugee students may lack effective language study skills. Students may show great passion in wanting to improve their English, but they probably do not know how to approach it efficiently and consistently.

Last but not least, as with all foreign language students, encouragement seems to always be one of the best means to motivate refugee students to continue striving. I hope that through encouragement from thoughtful English teachers North Korean students will gain greater confidence and work hard to achieve their goals. I look forward to seeing more North Korean refugees adapt well to South Korea and make their dreams come true in this democratic country.

AD: Thank you very much.

Notes

1. The literal translation of the Korean is “North Korean Defector Youth Christian Alliance.” The interview follows the convention of the organization, which uses “Korean Refugees Youth Christian Association” and “KRYCA” on its official blog: <http://cafe.naver.com/kryca>.

2. Extensive grammar concerns the rules and paradigms of a language. Questions related to extensive grammar can include asking how to change an active sentence into a passive sentence and if it is correct to place an adjective before a noun as well as after a relative pronoun.

3. See “Talbukttae sŏngyŏsa toun 70%ga kidokin doetta [Through Missionaries’ Help in Escaping from North Korea, 70% of Refugees Become Christian],” *Kookmin Ilbo*, October 17, 2007, <http://missionlife.kukinews.com/article/view.asp?page=1&gCode=kmis&arcid=0920692783&code=23111111> (accessed December 7, 2009).

4. The grammar-translation method holds that a foreign language is best acquired by comparing and contrasting it to the primary language. Students memorize lists, rules, and paradigms, such as noun, adjective, and verb form tables, in order to make successful translations.

Biographical Statements

Karen Choi is an instructor in the Practical English Department at Hanyang University in Seoul, South Korea. She earned a master’s degree in TESOL from Trinity Western University in British Columbia, Canada, and a bachelor’s degree in classical animation from Sheridan College in Ontario, Canada. Her areas of academic interest are sociolinguistics, language and identity, and phonology.

Alzo David-West is an instructor at Duksung Women’s University in Seoul,

South Korea, the newsbriefs editor for *North Korean Review*, and a doctoral candidate in communication at the European Graduate School in Leuk-Stadt, Switzerland. He earned a master's degree in English from East Carolina University and a bachelor's degree in English *magna cum laude* from Chowan University. His areas of academic interest are multicultural and transnational literature, literary theory and criticism, and North Korean studies.